

## **Family Finding and Engagement** **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this review is to summarize the available research on Family Finding and Engagement (FFE) strategies, and to highlight the most promising models being implemented in child welfare agencies. This report emphasizes the benefits that result when FFE is applied for all foster youth, upfront and continuously, throughout the dependency process. The goal is to increase the number of foster youth who achieve permanency by developing a practice that promotes early identification and engagement of all family members and potential permanency connections, and in the case of Native American children, their Tribes.

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care, appointed by the Chief Justice to improve and develop the court system, has recommended that child welfare agencies: (1) use FFE at the earliest possible point in dependency cases and (2) ensure that foster children maintain relationships with family members and other important people in their lives.

Similarly, the State's Program Improvement Plan strategies relating to permanency aims to increase involvement by children, their families, and other individuals who were important to them in the case planning and decision making processes. An important step in achieving this goal is the implementation of FFE techniques, including focus on engaging fathers of foster children.

Family Finding and Engagement refers to all methods and processes by which close and distant relatives, non-relative extended family members (NREFM), and tribes of Native American children are identified and contacted to become involved in the foster child's life. These individuals and tribes can provide potential placement or guardianship options, and can support children simply by establishing meaningful relationships with them.

Permanency includes any established and committed relationship between a child and an adult who will provide support, stability, love, and encouragement. Positive permanency outcomes encompass not only legal permanency outcomes such as reunification of the child with his or her parents, adoption, and guardianship, but more importantly extends to meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging.

The Child Welfare Council's permanency committee has defined the core elements of FFE and begun this literature review to provide a summary of the available and most promising FFE strategies. This review first presents the different methods agencies have used in successfully implementing FFE strategies into their dependency case procedures. Next, the results of more empirical studies of different programs are provided. And finally, legislative efforts and obstacles to widespread adoption of FFE are included.

California Permanency for Youth Project:  
Organizational Development Guide for Youth Permanency (2007)

This guide discusses steps and practices that have been successful in helping public child welfare agencies to institute a focus on youth permanency and implement new strategies to support that practice.

Permanency includes having the youth involved in finding at least one life long connection to a supporting and caring adult. This includes adoption and reunification, but also considers the importance of developing any meaningful and supportive family-like relationship. Social workers should focus on connections, and not just placement. An emphasis on placement leads to a misconception that the youth's needs are concluded once the youth is placed. But a connection emphasis continues even after locating connections are made, and works to support those connections.

The 19 steps outlined in the guide are targeted to an agency just starting out with a new permanency implementation program. At each step, the guide explains the rationale and how it fits into the bigger picture, set out action steps to move the process along, offers examples of what other counties have done, and advises on pitfall to watch out for.

California Permanency for Youth Project:  
Emancipated Youth Connections Project Final Report/Toolkit (2008)

This Report and Toolkit was developed from the Emancipated Youth Connections Project (EYCP). EYCP was tremendously successful in finding family or other caring adults to be lifelong connections for older youth who had aged out of foster care with no connection to a caring adult. The results demonstrate that permanency can still be established for young adults even after they have left the child welfare system, and can still have an important beneficial impact.

Based on the results, the report concludes that the full capacity of the participants' family and non-related social networks that were not developed during the participants' time in foster care. Had these new connections been formed earlier, some participants would likely have left the system to a permanent outcome (reunification, adoption, guardianship) rather than aging out and being left to fend for themselves. Even without achieving permanency, the youth certainly would have known that they had caring relationships with people beyond those people paid to care for them. Years of loneliness could have been avoided if family finding and engagement services had been provided sooner. The emotional benefit to participants would have been immeasurable, not to mention the substantial cost saving for the counties from shortened lengths of time in care. The toolkit includes forms and guides for social workers to use in implementing similar Emancipated Youth Connections Projects.

#### Child Welfare Permanency Reforms, Promising Practices Report, No. 1-6 (2004)

The Center for Social Services Research at the University of California, Berkeley developed this series of reports based on data from The Child Welfare Permanency Reforms study, which examines the process of implementing concurrent planning techniques in California counties.

This guide outlines concurrent planning strategies for seeking permanent placements for youth while concurrently pursuing reunification with the parents. Effective concurrent planning programs include early searches for relative and parents, resolution of paternity issues, and compliance with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requirements. The article further states that potential placement families must be informed of the process and trained to meet the challenges. Regular evaluation and case review is essential. In dealing with barriers that arise, agencies and all parties involved must work together and compromise to find solutions; communication is crucial.

A fundamental philosophy of concurrent planning is to shift the emotional burden off the youth and onto the adults. By exploring as many permanency options as possible, each potential permanency adult may be less likely to have the youth placed with them. However, the youth is more likely overall to find a permanent placement. The result is that the adults assume more of the emotional risk of placement uncertainty. Generally, adults are better able to manage the ambiguity of relationships and the uncertainty of the future than are youth.

#### Four Step Cycle for Incorporating Permanence for Adolescents - R.G. Lewis (2008)

This article outlines steps for incorporating a new focus on permanence in all child welfare agencies and programs. The author asserts that more than simply training is needed to adapt new ideas into old practices. The steps are designed to identify resistance and barriers, and address them with specifically targeted consultation, in addition to training, and continued re-evaluation and re-training.

#### Recommendations for Effective Partnerships on Youth Permanence (2006)

This report from the Juvenile Courts and Child Welfare Work Group focuses on the need for courts to improve their role in attaining permanency for foster youth. The courts are integral in the dependency system and must do more to facilitate permanent placement, and shift the perspective away from an acceptance of long term foster care as an option. Recommendations include examples, policy perspectives and action steps for implementation by courts and child welfare agencies. The steps address not only ways of changing overall perspectives and beliefs, but also restructuring and reallocating funding to support necessary programs.

California Permanency for Youth Project:  
Six Steps to Find a Family: A Practice Guide on Family Search and Engagement (2007)

This practical guide through the Family Search and Engagement (FSE) process includes the steps in finding families and creating connections. Though the discussion is organized step by step, FSE is not a linear process. Social workers must proceed through the steps for each potential contact as soon as they are found. The guide suggests that social workers should be involved in multiple steps with various leads at all times. Youth should be interviewed early and often, and kept involved at every step, especially at critical decision making points.

In this guide, many of the myths and misconceptions regarding foster youth as being unadoptable are specifically refuted. The guide raises many of the possible questions and practical concerns that all parties involved might encounter, and provides helpful suggestions to answer the questions and overcome the concerns.

Los Angeles Productivity and Quality Awards Program – Metro North Permanency Unit (2007)

Los Angeles County piloted the Metro North Permanency Unit (MNPU), a dedicated unit of five specially trained Children's Social Workers (CSWs), whose casework focused on the permanency needs of older youth. The program was designed to address the problem of foster youth aging out of the system without lifelong connections or preparation to lead productive and healthy lives.

The program yielded astonishingly successful, resulting in a substantial number of permanent connections and permanent placements. An additional important result was fiscal savings for the county of approximately \$1.8 million over the course of the program from October 2005 to March 2007. Permanency Units are now being established throughout the department of Children and Family Services.

Alameda County – Group Home Step Up Project: Moving Up and Out of Congregate Care – Final Report (2005)

Over ten percent of Alameda County foster youth were in group homes in 2005. These group homes were only intended to be temporary placements, but often, youth would spend their entire adolescent years in various group home settings.

The Step Up Project was designed to address this problem. Over six months, six case workers were dedicated to working at two large group homes with seventy-two of the loneliest youth, who had the least number of and prospects for permanency connections. The report discusses the steps taken to uncover hidden and long lost family members, reconnect them with the youths, and details the amazing results that followed. More than half of the youth involved were either placed out of group home with family, or slated for placement within 1 to 3 months of the program concluding. All the youth were able to find caring committed relatives previously unknown to them.

The main focus of this report is the human element, and the impact these efforts made in the lives of the youth, as well as of the workers. The project demonstrated that most of these youth did not need to be in group homes long term, and social workers were capable of finding permanent placements for them.

#### Family Finding References – Kevin Campbell (2009)

A compilation of reference materials compiled by Kevin Campbell, who pioneered the practice of applying advanced search technologies to family finding. Campbell continues to develop intensive search techniques, and trains social workers around the country. This packet includes an extensive bibliography of articles related to family finding, articles highlighting implementation and successes, and training guides.

*-Foster Kids' Last Resort: Finding the Lost Relatives, Wall Street Journal (2007)*

This article discusses using Internet search companies to find long lost relatives for foster youth. The goal is to find someone willing to provide placement for the child, or develop a meaningful long term relationship. The featured story of Tony Ruiz shows that even after years of isolation, many potential connections can still be uncovered. The article also explains that some children develop behavioral and psychological problems from lingering in foster care, and these problems can have an effect on permanent placements. This article stresses that family finding strategies must be implemented earlier for foster children in order to optimize the potential benefits of finding permanent connections, and protect against behavioral and psychological problems.

*-Hunting for Grandma, Youth Today (2006)*

Family finding is being implemented in foster care systems throughout the country. Moving foster children into permanent homes is becoming a main priority as evidence increasingly indicates that long-term foster care is harmful for children. The substantial results achieved through new people-locating strategies are undoing traditional perceptions that older foster youth just don't have families anymore. Found relatives are often interested in reconnecting with the youth, or becoming caregivers.

There are always obstacles to family finding implementation. Relatives may be unsuitable to care for youth; agencies face structural limitations on resources and staff. This article concludes that ultimately, any costs associated with finding placements for foster youth are far outweighed, both in financial savings, and overall improvement to the well-being of children connected with loving families.

*-Six Steps for Family Finding, Workshop Material, presented by Kevin Campbell*

An overview of the process involved in locating family members for youth. Includes a phone "script" for making contact and engaging long lost relatives.

*-Mobility Mapping and Flow Diagrams, Brigitte De Lay, M.S.W. (2003)*

Mobility maps and flow diagrams are tools that field workers have used to reunify children and families separated following armed conflicts and natural disasters in areas like Rwanda. Mobility maps are simple visual aids to help workers learn about social and

economic relationships, activities, and memories that children associate with specific locations. Flow diagrams outline a family's social safety network through question about who the family members go to when problems arise. These techniques have been crucial in Rwanda for tracing children's families and reuniting dispersed members. Application of these tools in the context of family finding may also prove beneficial.

#### KEYPOINT Projected Fiscal Savings (2008)

This California Permanency for Youth Project report provides fiscal savings estimates for Kern County when youth achieve permanency success. Over \$200,000 a month could be saved if only 37 youth were placed, resulting in millions in annual savings. The calculations provide solid cost justification for permanency programs, aside from the immeasurable benefits that come from providing youth with homes.

#### Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services - Permanency Partners Program (2008)

The idea behind the Permanency Partners Program (P3) was to have retired social workers come back to devote time to work on cases of youth who had been in foster care for the longest periods. The goal was to find permanency for them, one at a time. P3 workers would review files for possible lifelong placements (reunification, adoption or guardianship), and also meaningful lifelong relationships.

Implemented in April 2005, the program yielded tremendous results in a short period of time. By December 2007, P3 had provided services to 2311 youth. 747 of the youth were able to identify or establish a permanency plan. 99 youth returned home to a parent and 79 were moving towards reunification with a parent. In addition, 12 youth had been adopted, 9 youth were in adoptive placements, and 214 youth previously opposed to adoption were involved in adoption planning. Finally, 120 youth received legal guardianships, and 214 youth had a plan of legal guardianship identified.

#### Sacramento County - Destination Family Cost Savings Spreadsheet

Gail Johnson Vaughan, retired Executive Director of Sierra Adoption Services, developed a spreadsheet to track cost savings for the Destination Family project, a partnership between Sacramento County and Sierra Adoption Services. The project worked with the county mental health department, and was able to bill some services to EPSDT (Early and Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment), which provides either a five or ten percent match (the amount varies by county).

Four templates were made for use in calculating fiscal savings from placements:

1. A page detailing savings based on the type of pre-permanence placement; considers Adoption Assistance Program and KinGAP costs when figuring net savings.
2. A page on KinGAP and enhanced KinGAP rates.
3. A master list of savings for individual youth. Includes calculations based on age, pre-permanence placement level, type of permanence, date permanence achieved, date

youth turns 18 etc. It shows the savings to date (recalculates daily) and total savings achieved by age 18.

4. A summary page of information on the Master List.

#### Sacramento County Destination Family Project Summary (Date?)

The goal of the Destination Family project is to ensure that no child in Sacramento County ages out of foster care without a permanent family connection. Since inception, the program has achieved a 79% success rate. One current objective is to continue and expand the project by reinvesting the savings realized as a result of the successful placements. The county could potentially realize annual savings of over \$9 million. The costs expended on the program could even be recovered within the same year. Funding of projects such as Destination Family would support a budget reform policy of spending more on projects that actually improve outcomes and recover costs.

#### Conclusion

Support has been growing for the further implementation of Family Finding and Engagement strategies in child welfare agencies. In 2005, and again in 2006, the Legislature put forth bills to amend the Welfare and Institution Codes related to dependent children. The amendments required that FFE searches be initiated earlier in dependency cases, before permanent placement decisions were made for youth unable to reunite with their parents.

Unfortunately, the Governor vetoed these proposals (See Appendix A), stating that family searches were already required when youth were being placed in foster care. But that response misses the point that family finding must be conducted earlier, in order for youth to realize the true benefits. Youth could avoid years in the dependency system if relative placements are found sooner, and can endure the burden of foster care better when they have supportive permanency relationships. Waiting until placement decisions are being made before requiring family searches can come too little too late. The Governor's concern with funding also reveals a misperception about the cost-benefits of early FFE implementation. Research indicates that early implementation of FFE will produce substantial savings, both long term, and usually within the same year. The sooner youth are placed with permanent families, the sooner the savings to the State begin to accrue.

FFE will produce substantial financial savings for the State, and yield immeasurable benefits in the emotional and physical well-being of foster youth. FFE is necessary, not only for older foster youth at risk of aging out of the system, but for all foster children at the front end of the system as well as those in long term care, waiting to be placed with loving families.

## Appendix A

### Assembly Bill No.880

February 18, 2005 – This bill proposes amendments to Section 16500.1 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, relating to dependent children. The bill would require the state to encourage the development of approaches that include a search for relatives available for placement before permanent placement decisions are made for children who cannot be reunited with their families.

It is the intent of the Legislature to use the strengths of families and communities to serve the needs of children, to reduce the necessity for removing children from their home, to encourage speedy reunification of families when it can be safely accomplished, to locate permanent homes and families with relatives for children who cannot return to their biological families, to reduce the number of placements experienced by these children, to ensure that children leaving the foster care system have support within their communities, to improve the quality and homelike nature of out-of-home care, and to foster the educational progress of children in out-of-home care.

The statute is amended to include provisions requiring that a search for relatives available for placement is initiated before permanent placement decisions are made for children who are unable to be reunited with their families; and that the youth are actively involved in the team approach to foster care and permanency planning process.

### Assembly Bill 2031

February 14, 2006 – The prior amendments are affirmed and reenacted again with minor typographical and grammatical alterations. A notable change in wording of the Legislative intent occurred, revising the phrase “to locate permanent homes and families with relatives” to “to *find* permanent homes and families, *preferably* with relatives”, indicating that relative placement is not the only focus, just preferred, and to be pursued along with non-relative extended family possibilities.

### Governor’s Veto Message for AB 2031

Current law already requires counties to identify and locate family members when making foster care placements. The Administration has already taken action to promote permanency and the well-being of children. A first of its kind federal waiver has been secured to provide counties the flexibility to use federal funds on preventive services for families in crisis, to keep children in safe and stable homes, and to reduce the need for foster care placement. \$255 million has been allocated to support successful transitions of former foster youth to adulthood, increase adoptions, and restructure the child welfare system and the provision of services. The KinGAP program has been expanded to enhance the ability of relatives to care for foster children, and to support requirements that promote relationships between youth and mentors, relatives and extended family.



Given efforts to date, including the California Child Welfare Council established by AB 2216, this AB 2031 is unnecessary.

HR 6893

The bill proposes amendments to the statutes regarding financial support for kinship guardianship placements. It includes provisions on eligibility and requirements for kinship guardianship assistance payments; funding amounts and limits; independent living services; welfare benefits. Also provides for funding to kinship navigator programs that assist kinship caregivers in utilizing programs and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising, and to promote effective partnerships among public and private agencies to ensure kinship caregiver families are served.